

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN

INFORMANT: ANONYMOUS [POLAND]

INTERVIEWER: YINGCHAN ZHANG, CHRISTOPH STROBEL

DATE: MAY 2, 2008

Y = YANGCHANG

A = ANONYMOUS

C = CHRISTOPH

Tape 08.39

Y: Anonymous 6 you live in Lowell?

A: Yes, I live in Lowell.

Y: Tell us a little bit about yourself, like how you ended up in Lowell and stuff?

A: Well I came in '93. June 10th actually, it's going to be fifteen year since I came to Lowell. And I came to Lowell mostly because of relatives that already lived here. But how we got here was a bit unusual I think, because my father, in the past when we were younger, he thought maybe that would be a good idea. And he actually tried to get a visa. Being a Polish, you do have to get a visa to come here. You can't just show up. So he tried, but he couldn't. And actually my aunt and uncle who lived in Lowell came to visit. And they just were joking around how my parents should come visit, and they're definitely going to come, and it was kind of a funny story. And then my aunt actually went back, and I don't know if you're familiar with green card lottery at all? She was the one who filled out the paperwork. At that time you could fill it out for somebody else.... My mom won the lottery for the family to come and live here permanently... if we choose to. It was really up to my mom to make the decision to all of a sudden pack and go? She always wanted to travel, and she wanted to go places. So she thought, why not? You know, why not go and check out what America is all about. The plan was originally that we were only going to be here for a year. And at first it changed from my mom just going, then my mom and dad going. And then we said, "No, no, no, no, no, you're not leaving us at home." And so we finally all ended up here. After a few months my mom

actually got pregnant. That changed the whole year plan. We just end up staying, and we have been here ever since. And I do have a younger brother. And I went to Lowell High. I went to the Butler School before that, then Lowell High... and then UMass Amherst. I got my teaching degree and I currently teach eighth grade in Lowell. So pretty much Lowell most of the time, except for an exchange program, one year in Poland when I was at UMass. I don't know what kind of information you want?

C: No, that's very good. Your family, you came here because you had relatives here?

A: We went to Lowell instead of maybe somewhere else, because that was where my aunt lived who send the information. She was the one who found the sponsor, who found a job for my mom. So that's just why we came to Lowell. Because Lowell isn't very... it doesn't have a very new Polish Community. It's mostly generations that have lived here for awhile. So maybe Lowell wouldn't be our first choice if we... knew more about it, or had other choices, but because our family happened to be here.

C: Can you talk a little bit about the Polish Community? Do you find it a challenge because the Polish Community is so old, or does that bother you? How important of a role does the Polish Community play in your life?

A: Personally for me that was something that was really lacking. I went to school, and my sister and I were the only Polish kids in the whole school. They could not find somebody who would even do some translation, just something simple to work with us on assignments. They finally found some retired teacher who spoke some Polish. I don't think she's ever been to Poland, but I know her mom was Polish. She was amazing. She helped us that first year. After that she had an injury, so that was it. But that first year she was our help... because honestly we didn't speak any English. And it was just pretty much like, "What do we do with them?" It was really hard. I didn't see my sister. It was just me with all these people who spoke English. And I had no idea. That made it that much harder. I think a community that would have had a lot more Polish people, it would have been much easier.... My parents couldn't really help, because they lacked the English skills to do that. It was my aunts and uncles that I have...because it is a bigger family that we have here. It's not a close family. It is distant relatives, but just because we, you know, once we came here it was.... They became our close family. They all took their turn in helping us.... My mom was pregnant. So all that was going on, the doctors.... I was a six year old in gynecologist office translating. It was very hard.... You never have that parent support. It was just like all of a sudden I became like a parent to my parents. It was nice because we had, and we still have a Polish Church. And there are not that many people, but we do have that small community that keeps it together.

C: What's the name of that church?

A: Holy Trinity. It's on High Street. Actually because this Sunday, May 3rd, is the Polish Independence Day, we actually have something this Sunday at City Hall. We have a little Polish celebration with Holy Trinity and another church... the National Catholic Church... on Lakeview Ave... in my old neighborhood.

Y: You mentioned the old neighborhood that you lived in. Where is that?

A: It is in Centralville. It's almost like we lived, like almost in an intersection. You know, it was so close that we were like in the midst of all just like... I don't know if you're familiar with Centralville. Do you know where Tavern at the Bridge is? In that parking lot that building.... Seriously, if we just turned off the lights, across the street we saw everything. Cops pulling cars, people on the ground for drugs.... It was just like watching a cop show. It was my family and then my aunt, and then her daughter's family, and then some elderly lady who lived there. It was pretty much a Polish house. The owner was Polish. It was an elderly person. He eventually passed. I'm sure he sold it to somebody else, because it was hard for him to keep it up.... But the community, it was just very... my cousin walked down the street and was almost pulled into a car. It wasn't exactly the safest place in the world, but we had that building and we kept it. The neighbors on our side were... somebody we talked to. They were really nice.... But it was not exactly the safest place.... We moved since then, when I was in high school, and our neighborhood is much safer.

C: Where do you live?

A: We actually live very close to Cawley Stadium.

C: That's a nice neighborhood.

A: My aunt and uncle moved, and then we moved to the street. So we still have that connection, we're still staying tight.

A: And that's, that is another thing. It's harder for my brother to keep the Polish heritage. My aunt, just to make it easier on her kids she didn't insist on the whole Polish thing. They don't really communicate well in Polish. And so my brother, he doesn't really have any peers to talk to in Polish. He does, he reads and writes and so forth, because of our help and the Polish School in Boston, but it's harder for him to keep that Polish, you know, because he doesn't have anybody really to talk to. So if the Polish Community was bigger it would have been easy.

C: But there is a lot of Poles in New England as I understand it, right?

A: There are places. And at different times we thought about moving, but... my brother, before he turned eight... he became sick. He had Leukemia...and he was in treatment for two years, and then relapsed again. Now he's in treatment again. Just being closer to Boston Children's and so forth, that changed a little bit. We're happy where we live. Once we got settled, put down roots...we like Lowell

Y: So how are they today? Do they speak English now?

A: Well frankly every time they ask me for something like can you call? I'm, "you know what, you're pretty good." Especially when my dad asks, you know, can you call to get, I don't know, a car part or something, I'm just, "Dad, you know those names better than I do. [Laughs] I don't even understand like what are you talking about?" Honestly, there grammar, maybe they don't have as big as a vocabulary? But they can communicate just fine. They'll get their point across and you know.

Y: How do your parents and brothers see themselves?

A: Well, my brother is a lot different. He was born here. He had been to Poland twice, but I mean the first time he was really young. I think he knows Poland just from us... he is Polish American in a way. He has a point of view of both worlds. So it's very interesting. I don't...what my parents think of themselves? They've gotten used to being here and they like it here, and so forth, but I think they neither feel that they fit in here or in Poland. And that's sort of where I am, sort of that middle ground that I'll never be like another Pole going to Poland. I never will feel what they feel.... I'm in the process of becoming a citizen. Actually my interview is on May 30th. I don't think I've ever, I'm ever going to be an American like one who lived here all their lives. It's really weird just a feeling of being in the middle.... It's never one or the other

C: I think that's the problem with identity questions, they're often hard to answer, but I think you're describing a feeling that I think a lot of people in that kind of situation feel.

A: I always feel like I'm not good enough with my Polish...just because you know, I never went to college in Poland. And I always will be that ESL person here.

C: Have you been back to Poland twice?

A: I've been back to Poland many times. I came to the states in '93 and then I went back in '95 for a summer. I went back in '98 for a summer. In 2001 I went for the whole year for exchange. Then I went...

C: Where did you go for the exchange?

A: Poznan. I don't know if you know...

C: No, I've been there.

A: So it was a lot of fun. It was such a great experience, because I got to travel. And it was a chance to be there throughout the entire year, you know, all the holidays, everything. Just be there again, like you know, it was amazing. I really enjoyed it. Actually right when I came back that was when my brother's illness happened. So it was a mixed [homecoming]. I went back in 2005 for a summer, 2006 for a summer, and 2007 last year I just went for a few days for a wedding. I don't know about this year, because I got engaged.

C: Congratulations.

Y: Congratulations.

A: Thank you. I'm actually moving to New Jersey because he lives in New Jersey. So I'm leaving Lowell! [Laughs] You just caught me in the last [unclear].

C: Do you have a lot of family still back in Poland?

A: All my close family my parents siblings, my two grandmothers that are still alive, everybody is in Poland. The relatives that we do have here are my parents' cousins.

C: Do you communicate at all with family back in Poland?

A: IM in Polish, emails, phone calls....

C: Do you use phone cards, or just a regular?

A: There are certain companies that my parents use. I'm different, I use the internet. That's just faster, easier to keep in touch, and kind of keep track of each other.

Y: Do you see any difference like over the years?

A: I notice the differences between the states and Poland more. Just the way things look. How people perceive things. Their perception of life in general... the mentality is different, and I think once you leave and you live in the states, you see the differences. And because you come from other place you see, you see the mentality of the American people, and how that relates back. It's interesting.... I hear how Polish people perceive the people that I'm now part.... It's like, hmm, is that really true? Is that really how it works? You see the differences more, you know? For the Poles things are always bad. They are more negative about everything. They complain more.

C: What subject do you teach?

A: Math. That's what I studied at UMass.

Y: How is the teaching like for you?

A: Different. Just teaching in general for me? I love it. It's a lot of work. I don't think people really realize how much work it is. I never did before I actually went into it. It's just amazing. You can't get away from it. It's with you when you do anything, you know, that part of the job and just the people that you're with, just anything from the day, just, you take it with you. Anybody's attitude towards you from the classroom, anybody's problems... the hundred people that I see... that I teach, all of them travel with me all day long, all week long, all year long. It's really funny actually. And the work behind it,

there's quite a lot. But I do like what I do. I don't think I would, I would be doing it, because... it doesn't pay as much as other jobs that go with the whole mathematical field.

C: Highest paid graduates, period, are math grads. (A: Really?) Yes, they earn on average the highest salary of all college graduates.

A: See I'm in the perfect field! [All laugh] I went into math because I wanted to teach it. It's funny, because people, when I say that people look at me funny. I don't think I'm a mathematician in the sense that I like theory. I like the connections, and I want my students to see them. I want them to understand. It's not that I want to come up with another theory out there. I like the teaching part of it more than just the theory.

C: What's the classroom like where you teach? By that I mean the diversity of students.

A: I have students of all sorts. No Polish students.... My own background... when my sister and I... came...I remember to this day... we went to see the principal, Sister... I remember that she said that she spoke Polish.... My cousins were in that school, and so forth. And she said for us to go to a public school, and then once we learn some English and then we could transfer into that school. So it was very disappointing....We felt... discarded.... And we went to public school. Once we started doing really well... the principal she talked about us moving. My parents were like, "are you kidding me?".... It was interesting... how they didn't even want to deal with it. Obviously the public school has no choice.... So it was kind of disappointing.

C: Did that experience influence how you teach, and how you deal with your students? Especially given Lowell's population – a lot of immigrant students, either first generation, or second generation?

A: I can relate more to them. The whole idea of having parents at home that cannot necessarily help. Translate... I'm more sensitive to it. I see their effort and I can relate. I think the students, when they hear that I came to the states... just knowing that I came in middle school, and went through some of those things, it kind of helps them be like.... My experience has definitely helped me in my own daily life just to see how they perceive things and how frustrated they become....

Y: How many years have you taught?

A: I've taught here in Lowell for three years. And then before that I did my practicum in Springfield for a year.

C: Oh which school in Springfield?

A: Chestnut Middle School.

C: Oh, Chestnut, yes. I have a couple of friends that taught there.

A: Really! Who?

C: Do you know Alex Alvarez. He was in the Math Department there.

A: I think I do.

C: He was a Columbian guy.

A: I think I do. Anyone else?

C: That's it with the math folks. I think everyone that I knew in the History and the Science Department there had left probably before you got there. My wife used to teach at Central she was a UMass 180 Days Graduate....

A: That was the program that I was in....

C: Oh... it's a small world.... How is your work now?

A: The school that I work for, and I'm so sad that I have to leave...actually I just told my principal that I am leaving. It's just really sad. I really like it. I like how they treat the students. How things are set up. I like what they do for them. It's a really good school. I feel that over three years I just become a little bit more comfortable with the setting. And just the teaching, it's much different than how I was taught. And even how my practicum went in Springfield because of the system that they use – Connective Mathematics.... Its a bit more project based, and just the whole teaching style is much more different. And the principal is great about trying to help me to fit in... always... there when I had trouble. The people that I've worked with in all of the three years there, I'm sad to leave.

C: New Jersey is not bad that's what I hear.

A: It's far! But I drive there pretty often, so it's going to be nice to finally not have to travel. It's a lot of hours driving... and very expensive. [Laughs]

C: Especially with the gas prices.

C: So the church plays still an important role in your life?

A: Definitely.... There are a lot of anniversaries [right now]. I'm part of the choir. I read. I'm one of the lectures in church. It has always played a big role. I think that was helpful, because.

C: There's no Polish store in Lowell as far as I understand?

A: No, there used to be one from what I hear.

C: Okay.

A: There's one in Boston.... We used to go to Worcester.... Then we switched... after my brother became sick.... I think it's a little bit closer.... We always just buy all of the Polish bread for two weeks, freeze it, very regular routine. Through my wild days as a teenager we went to Connecticut on a regular basis. Just Saturday night there and back... Hartford, New Britain, those areas, just to have Polish people to you know, to hang with, to go dancing in a Polish place.... That's what I've always said to the people who lived with all these big communities... you don't even know what you're missing. They did not appreciate what they had.

C: Is your fiancé Polish?

A: Yes.

C: Is that important to you, or did that just happen?

A: It has been.... I think I will connect better... if I had gotten in a relationship with somebody just from here who has no background of any.... I think it would be hard to relate, because I think it's so important, and it has been such a big chunk of my life. Just somebody to relate to with our experiences... he hasn't been here as long as I have. He's been here I don't know, seven or eight years, something like that. It's definitely helpful.... We can share, talk, and just keep the Polish heritage. It is important to me. I even made my brother learn Polish... He wrote a really nice essay in his school, how because of me he now knows how to...even though I would force him! Seriously, at some points he was like, "I don't want to do it." And my parents would have probably not cared. I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, come, come, come, come." And so he would...and he...and then he started going to the Polish School in Boston, but because of again, being sick and so forth it's just...but at least he can read, he can write. I know he's happy and he appreciates that.

C: Can I ask you another rather personal question? And you don't have to answer it. Are you planning to have children, and if so, would you want them to learn Polish?

A: Yes, and yes.... Language is so huge.

Y: Does your family vote?

A: I honestly don't know if they have voted since they got here. For president probably.... I know they don't vote for city elections, or anything like that, but I can't remember when they became citizens.... Personally I couldn't.

Y: You are not following Lowell politics at all?

A: I don't like it. I honestly, I...

Y: Why don't you like the city politics?

A: I don't have very good opinion of all of the people involved in politics. I think they're always [laughs] somehow deceiving people a little bit, because to get their point across sometimes they have to say things they don't exactly mean. It was never my thing.

C: Fair enough. Is it city specific or politics in general?

A: Just in general. I'm not a Democrat. I'm not a Republican. I don't...because there are things I don't like about each.... I don't believe in any of the party views really.

C: Politics done! [All laugh]

C: The next one, this might be short too.

Y: The National Park?

C: The National Park, you're right in tune. [All laugh]

Y: Have you been to certain exhibits and museums run by the National Park in downtown?

A: I know they had certain international exhibits. I know that they were showing some movies and different things. I personally have gone. I think my cousins and my aunt might have gone there and might have looked at different things. But not the museum itself.... I don't know about my mom and dad. I don't think they have ever. Although when we had the Folk Festival you know, they came and participated and all that. You know, when you live in the same city you don't.... I've personally have gone just because I've gone with my school.... I know my aunt and uncle, when there was something going on, because lately they have been showing different movies, especially when they were doing some Polish in the history museum here.

C: Your church, I think they're involved with the Folk Festival?

A: They sell food and so forth.

C: Do you volunteer for that, or?

A: I've never sold food with them. I've gone to the Folk Festival....They've never asked. If they had I mean I'm sure.

Y: You guys have a Polish choir, and an English choir.

A: Well because there are English masses, and Polish masses. Both of the choirs are singing this Saturday together at the mass.

C: Well thanks very much for talking to us.